

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING
Minutes of January 5, 2021

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Julie H. Goodrich, Nathaniel Miller, Charles Morse, and John Stevens. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Laurie Baroffio (Finance Director), Jon Ignatowski (Economic Development Director), Peter J. DeMasi (Fire Chief), Carlos Pinkham, Kaitlyn Keating, Christine Barnes, Paulette Gagne, Kahwa C. Douoguih, Catherine Johnston, and Carolyn Stevens.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 6:01 p.m. In keeping with Governor Phil Scott's COVID-19 "stay at home" directive, the meeting was held remotely.

- II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Scheduled):** None.

III. BUDGET WORK SESSION

- a. FY 2021/2022 Town Budget Recap & Review.** Chair Maxwell said tonight's meeting will focus on remaining issues in the proposed FY 2021/2022 budgets for the Northfield Police Department (NPD) and Economic Development. Any other concerns regarding the proposed budget also can be discussed. Manager Schulz said after the last budget meeting (12/29/20), Finance Director Laurie Baroffio revised the initial draft budget to include any changes agreed upon by Select Board members. She also received an updated invoice from the Vermont League of Cities & Towns that covered the cost of property, liability, and workers comp insurance for calendar year 2021. This bill was a little higher than expected and all related budget line items were adjusted accordingly. Manager Schulz said all the budget changes to date result in a net increase of \$5,960, which means the expected property tax increase will remain at 3.4%. He added there are just a few remaining budget issues outstanding.

Northfield Police Department. Chair Maxwell would like to begin with the proposed NPD Capital Equipment plan (CEP) budget, which covers (among other items) scheduled replacements of the NPD cruiser fleet. It was noted it has been recent policy to budget for the replacement of three (3) vehicles but to retain an additional one for non-patrol use and as a backup patrol vehicle. However, this policy was disrupted when the 2017 Ford Explorer was totaled in a November 2019 accident and had to be replaced a couple years ahead of schedule. The proposed NPD CEP budget includes \$45,000 to replace the 2014 Ford Explorer, which is now the oldest vehicle in the NPD fleet. However, Manager Schulz said the Town Budget & Financial Review Subcommittee (Select Board members Goodrich and Morse) has recommended against this purchase as not justified given current department staffing. Board member Miller agrees with this, stating that the 2014 Ford Explorer should be able to serve as the backup vehicle until FY 2024/2025, which is when the 2018 Ford Explorer is scheduled for replacement. He also feels NPD officers should be able to use their personal vehicles for transportation to and from court appearances, training sessions, etc., for which they would be reimbursed later at the Federal Mileage Rate. Board member Stevens disagrees, stating that the 2014 vehicle is in poor condition and subject to repeated costly repairs. It would be more cost-effective in the long run to replace it in the next fiscal year. Board member Morse, as he has stated previously, doesn't feel it is appropriate to use these budget sessions to set policy. Therefore, he would like to adhere to the current policy of budgeting the replacement of only three (3) NPD vehicles. Ms. Baroffio said this policy has been in effect for at least five (5) years and was working well until the 2019 accident. She noted the 2017 Ford Explorer was supposed to be retained as the fourth vehicle when the 2014 Ford Explorer was replaced in FY 2021/2022. However, the need for its immediate replacement depleted the account set up for this scheduled replacement. Chair Maxwell then asked Board member Miller if he felt the NPD could successfully operate with only three (3) patrol vehicles. Board member Miller felt it could and it would be financially irresponsible to spend \$45,000 on a new vehicle while the 2014 Ford Explorer is still serviceable. Chair Maxwell agreed with this conclusion and would like to postpone any NPD vehicle purchases until FY 2024/2025. Board member Goodrich also believes the NPD can get along with three (3) patrol vehicles or, rather, three and a half (3½) including the backup vehicle. Chair Maxwell noted the backup vehicle is kept on hand for emergencies and asked if it could be shared with other departments. Manager Schulz said this might be difficult since the backup vehicle is intended to serve as a patrol vehicle should one of the regular ones go out of service for repair, etc. A shared vehicle probably couldn't be used as a pursuit vehicle but he can look into this.

Economic Development Department. Manager Schulz said the only remaining issue in this budget is whether the municipality will fund the creation of a new professionally-designed “promotional” website. Economic Development Director Jim Ignatowski solicited bids from website developers and the quotes averaged around \$12,000. This promotional website would be separate from the current municipal website and the question remains whether the Select Board members would like to budget for this expense. There also is the matter of whether the website development would be funded solely by tax dollars or if existing Economic Development Fund monies would be used. The subcommittee also looked at this and it was their recommendation that the promotional website be constructed in-house at a much lower cost. Board member Miller shares this view and believes there are existing website templates that Mr. Ignatowski could use to build a useful promotional website. Board member Stevens believes Mr. Ignatowski’s time would be much better spent working on local economic development rather than creating a website without professional assistance. He also doesn’t think recycling an existing template would create the type of website that would attract prospective new businesses, etc. Board member Stevens believes the bids received represent the actual cost of professional website development and this money would be well spent. Chair Maxwell believes there appears to be Select Board consensus on the benefits of having a promotional website for Northfield but there remains a dispute over the funding mechanism. Since it is local businesses that would largely benefit from such promotion, Chair Maxwell suggested it might be possible to have them shoulder some of the development cost either through in-kind services or donations.

Mr. Ignatowski said he has provided Select Board members with detained information over the past few weeks regarding the local benefits of a professionally-developed promotional website. The remaining question seems to be whether the website can be developed at a lower cost than the bids received, which ranged from \$9,600 to \$25,000. He felt it could be done cheaper in-house but there would be trade-offs. Mr. Ignatowski said it took him about a month to redesign the current municipal website to one that was much more up-to-date and user friendly. It would take him much longer to create a new promotional website from scratch since he is a part-time employee and not a professional web designer. As part of his responsibilities as Economic Development Director, Mr. Ignatowski plans to apply for over \$50,000 in economic development grants in the next couple months and having to construct a new website would distract from this. In addition, the municipality might lose out on other grant opportunities if too much of his time is devoted to the new website. Mr. Ignatowski added that since he is not a website developer, any promotional website he might create probably would not have the functionality required. It also would probably take him about eight (8) months to put the new website online as opposed to the three (3) months it would take for a professional web designer. Mr. Ignatowski has envisioned the website coming online by late spring or early summer 2021, which might correspond with a rebounding post-COVID local economy. Waiting until late summer or early autumn, he felt, would be a missed opportunity. Mr. Ignatowski then added it was brought to his attention this afternoon that other promotional websites associated with Vermont communities, such as Waterbury and Middlebury, are not directly controlled by the municipality but rather by a separate organization dedicated to encouraging local business interests. Mr. Ignatowski contacted the Vermont League of Cities & Towns (VLCT) about this and was told this was due to issues related to public funds being used to benefit private interests. As these promotional websites sometimes highlight individual businesses, there is a concern that other local businesses might object that their property tax dollars are being used to provide assistance to their competitors and not them. The issue over who should finance, develop, maintain, etc. this promotional website was unanticipated and, as the VLCT representative recommended, should be discussed with an attorney before proceeding further.

Chair Maxwell asked if there might be a local organization interested in local economic development that might want to partner with the municipality on the promotional website. Mr. Ignatowski said the Northfield Community Development Network (NCDN) is one possibility as this group spearheaded the effort to create the Economic Development Director position he now holds. NCDN, he felt, was the nearest local equivalent to the organizations involved in the Waterbury and Middlebury promotional websites. The next step, however, would be to consult an attorney with expertise in such matters in order to determine the legal ramifications of either the direct or indirect involvement of the municipality. Board member Goodrich felt if a new municipal policy was being considered, this issue should not be discussed during a budget session. Manager Schulz said the creation of promotional website was first discussed at a regular meeting but it was the funding of the website that led this matter to be discussed in this setting. Board member Stevens thought it might be best to hold off on budgeting municipal funds for the promotional website until the legal questions are resolved and it is determined whether NCDN or another local organization would be willing to work with the municipality on this.

Kaitlyn Keating is a NCDN member and she supports the idea of tabling this matter for now. She also would like it determined how other Vermont communities have dealt with developing and maintaining promotional websites that extol local businesses, etc. On a personal note, Ms. Keating said the company where she works also didn't want to spend considerable funds on professional website design when their website needed an update. A current employee with some website experience was tasked with this responsibility. Although additional training was provided to her, eventually the employee had to admit she would not be able to create a professional website that would meet all her employer's expectations. This meant the company had to start all over again with several months lost in the process. Therefore, Ms. Keating believes hiring a professional web designer is worth the extra expense. She also is concerned about potential problems if it is seen that the municipality is directly promoting some local businesses and not others. In addition, Ms. Keating feels that due to the impact of COVID-19 on local businesses, this might not be the best time to ask them for promotional website donations. Due to the issues raised tonight, Chair Maxwell also felt it best to table this matter for the time being. Manager Schulz will do some research and find the appropriate attorney to assist us with the legal concerns.

Chair Maxwell then asked if any more remaining issues to be resolved. Manager Schulz said now that it appears to be Select Board consensus not to purchase a new NPD vehicle in the next fiscal year, it needs to be determined what will happen to the \$45,000 budgeted for this purpose. Do the Select Board members want this amount shifted into another account or removed entirely from the budget? Board members Goodrich and Miller would like the \$45,000 removed from the budget, which will decrease the tax rate by about one cent (1¢). Chair Maxwell has concerns of a tax rate spike in FY 2022/2023 when the bond payment for the Union Brook Road Reconstruction Project will jump from \$44,120 to \$119,720. Perhaps it might be best to keep this \$45,000 in the FY 2021/2022 budget. Manager Schulz and Ms. Baroffio will present options at the next budget meeting (01/07/21). Any other remaining issues also will be decided then. Ms. Baroffio then went through the budget revisions to date as indicated in the "Summary of Changes" attached to the revised budget.

IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Unscheduled). There was none.

V. EXECUTIVE SESSION. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Stevens, to go into executive session, in accordance with 1 VSA 313 (a)(1), in order to discuss a personnel matter with Manager Schulz present. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board went into executive session at 7:21 p.m.

Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Goodrich, to come out of executive session. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board came out of executive session at 8:58 p.m. No action was taken.

VI. ADJOURNMENT. Motion by Board member Morse, seconded by Board member Goodrich, to adjourn. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board adjourned at 8:56 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth L. McCann

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

These minutes were approved at the regular Select Board meeting of January 12, 2021.